



# Interest Groups in the American Democracy Part III

Who is in charge?  
Is it taxpayers or is it the special interest groups?  
Scott Walker

# What Do Interest Groups Do? Electioneering



- ...actively take part in an election campaign in order to influence who gets elected
- There are a number of ways interest groups can influence elections.
  - **candidate recruitment**: how new candidates get recruited and trained to run for local, state and national office is increasingly being handled by interest groups rather than political parties
  - **endorsements**: always welcome but support of an interest group does not always equate to support from that section of the voting population
  - **membership mobilization/volunteers**: While a hands-on, grassroots campaign requires more effort to organize, it can have great effect. Candidates and their campaigns take notice when activists from a particular group keep showing up.



# What Do Interest Groups Do? Electioneering



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  - **producing voter guides and/or summaries of the issues:** For years the Christian Coalition issued voter guides, which describe candidates' positions on issues that are particularly important to group members, such as abortion. Other groups (including the American Conservative Union and the Americans for Democratic Action) play the ratings game by publishing the positions of all members of Congress on key issues with the hope of swaying voters.
  - **independent advertising:** may be messages supportive of or opposing a particular candidate or may seek to inject specific issues into the debate without even mentioning the candidates

# What Do Interest Groups Do? Electioneering



- There are a number of ways interest groups can influence elections.
  - **financial and in-kind contributions**: regulated by federal and state law to varying degrees so that groups must always be mindful of to whom, how much and for what they are allowed to contribute
    - **getting out the vote (GOTV)**: critical part of campaign strategy ... a majority of voters may be in favor of a candidate but that doesn't help unless those voters actually go and vote on election day ... GOTV activities include direct mail, phone calls, provide transportation to and from polls, etc



# What Do Interest Groups Do? Electioneering



- There are a number of ways interest groups can influence elections.
  - **rating candidates and office holders:** a long history in American politics and have become an increasingly familiar part of the political landscape ... scores that various political, academic and media organizations assign to politicians based on voting records, issue stances, public statements and, more recently, campaign contributions ... If you're interested, Project Vote Smart's [Voter's Self Defense System](#) displays all known interest group ratings for each candidate and official, regardless of issue or bias.
  - **Political Action Committees (PACs)**

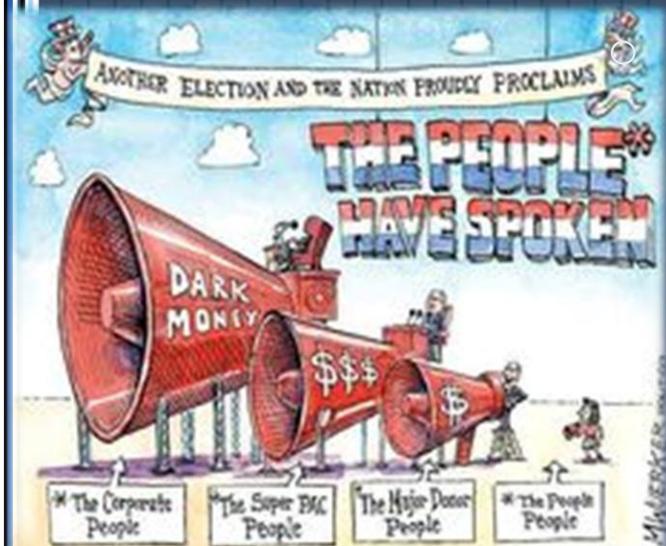


# What Do Interest Groups Do? Electioneering and Money



- Corporations and trade associations comprise the vast majority of expenditures by interest groups (more than 84% at the federal level) compared with issue-ideology groups (2% of these expenditures).
- **soft money**: money contributed by interest groups, labor unions and individual donors that is not subject to federal regulations

**dark money**: funds given to nonprofit organizations (primarily 501(c)(4) or social welfare groups and 501(c)(6) or trade association groups) that can receive unlimited donations from corporations, individuals and unions, can spend funds to influence elections, and are not required to disclose their donors





# What Do Interest Groups Do? Electioneering and Money

- campaign spending yields diminishing returns: The more a candidate spends, the less impact each additional dollar will have.
- Political Action Committees (PACs)
  - ...specialized organizations for raising and contributing campaign funds

not the same thing as interest groups ... think of a PAC as a financial contribution arm of an interest group ... lots of organizations other than interest groups may be associated with a PAC and most interest groups don't have a PAC varied in nature

have grown immensely in number since the 1980s



# What Do Interest Groups Do? Electioneering and Money



- Political Action Committees (PACs)
  - give instrumentally: donate to incumbents regardless of party, especially to members of key committees
  - most PAC contributions small and intended only to gain access to public officials
- Often it's the politicians who extort the PACs.
  - tollbooth maneuver: Speaker of the House or a powerful committee chair creates a procedural obstruction or postponement on the eve of an important vote. Campaign contributions are then implicitly solicited. If the tribute offered by those in favor of the bill's passage is too small (or if the money from opponents is sufficiently high), the bill is delayed and does not proceed.

# What Do Interest Groups Do? Electioneering and Money



- Often it's the politicians who extort the PACs.
  - **milker bills**: bills designed to “milk” donations from threatened individuals or businesses ... The real trick is to pit two industries against each other and pump both for donations, thereby creating a **double milker bill**.

The reason these fund-raising extortion tactics succeed is that politicians deploy them while bills are making their way through Congress, when lawmakers possess maximum leverage.



# What Do Interest Groups Do? Electioneering and Money



FEC 2016	to each candidate or candidate committee per election	to national party committee per calendar year	to state, district or local party committee per calendar year	to any other political committee per calendar year <sup>1</sup>	special limits
individual may give	\$2,700*	\$33,400*	\$10,000 (combined limit)	\$5,000	no limit
national party committee may give	\$5,000	no limit	no limit	\$5,000	\$46,800* to Senate candidate per campaign <sup>2</sup>
state, district and local party committee may give	\$5,000 (combined limit)	no limit	no limit	\$5,000 (combined limit)	no limit
PAC (multicandidate) <sup>3</sup> may give	\$5,000	\$15,000	\$5,000 (combined limit)	\$5,000	no limit
PAC (not multicandidate) may give	\$2,700*	\$33,400*	\$10,000 (combined limit)	\$5,000	no limit
authorized campaign committee may give	\$2,000 <sup>4</sup>	no limit	no limit	\$5,000	no limit

\* These contribution limits are indexed for inflation. (1) A contribution earmarked for a candidate through a political committee counts against original contributor's limit for that candidate. In certain circumstances, contribution may also count against contributor's limit to the PAC. (2) This limit is shared by the national committee and the national Senate campaign committee. (3) A multicandidate committee is a political committee with more than 50 contributors which has been registered for at least 6 months and, with the exception of state party committees, has made contributions to 5 or more candidates for federal office. (4) A federal candidate's authorized committee(s) may contribute no more than \$2,000 per election to another federal candidate's authorized committee(s).

# What Do Interest Groups Do? Electioneering and Money



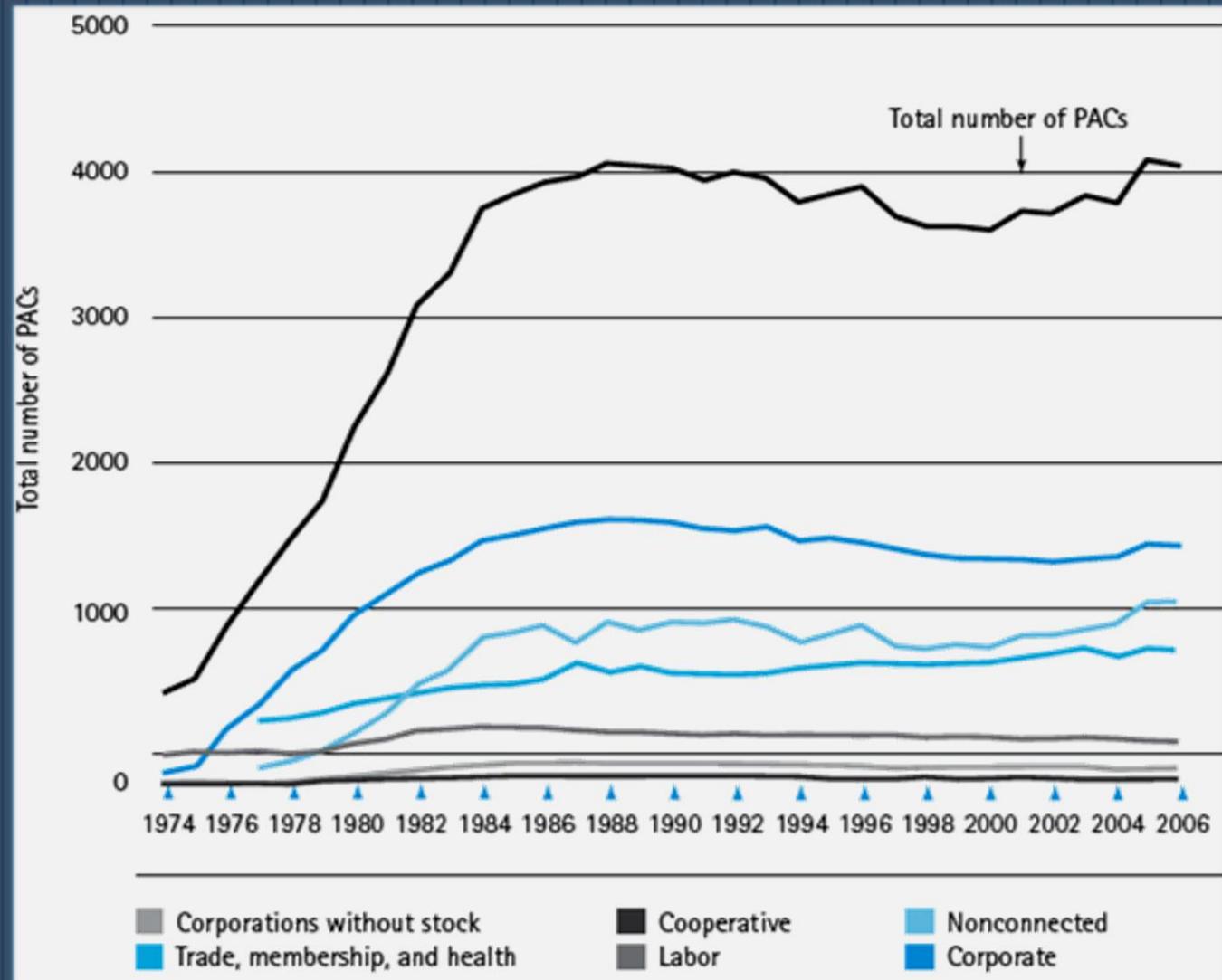
## The Supreme Court's Limits on Campaign Finance Laws

Year	Case	Limits	Vote
1976	Buckley v. Valeo	Overall campaign spending, candidate personal spending, and independent expenditures can't be capped.	5-3
2007	Wisconsin Right to Life v. FEC	The government can't halt outside group political advertising in the period before an election.	5-4
2008	FEC v. Davis	The government can't let opponents of self-financed candidates exceed the usual contribution limits	5-4
2010	Citizens United v. FEC	No limits on the amount of outside spending are permissible, and corporations can spend directly on campaigns	5-4
2011	Arizona Free Enterprise Club's Freedom PAC v. Bennett	Public financing systems can't use escalating matching funds	5-4
2014	McCutcheon v. FEC	A donor's overall spending on federal campaigns can't be capped	5-4

# What Do Interest Groups Do? Electioneering and Money



PACs formed rapidly after the 1974 Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) reforms.



# What Do Interest Groups Do? Electioneering and Money



## BUSINESS PAC CONTRIBUTIONS TEND TO FOLLOW POLITICAL POWER—WHEN CONTROL OF CONGRESS CHANGED, SO DID THE PATTERN OF BUSINESS CONTRIBUTIONS

	Percentage of Contributions to Republicans Jan.–Feb. 1993 (Democratic majority)	Percentage of Contributions to Republicans Jan.–Feb. 1995 (Republican majority)
American Dental Association	27	90
American Bankers Association	52	87
American Hospital Association	53	81
Ameritech	35	79
AT&T	36	79
American Institute of CPAs	45	87
Home Builders	45	71
Realtors	75	91
RJR Nabisco	69	81
United Parcel Service	55	78

# What Do Interest Groups Do? Organized Labor



- Obviously, organized labor is an interest group and not a technique used by interest groups. I include it here only because it has been so successful in using certain techniques.
- Labor began to emerge as a powerful player early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
  - could turn out large numbers of members
  - focus not only on labor issues but also other issues of concern to its members
- Union members provide the manpower for everything from turning out large crowds at rallies to working phone banks.



# What Do Interest Groups Do? Organized Labor

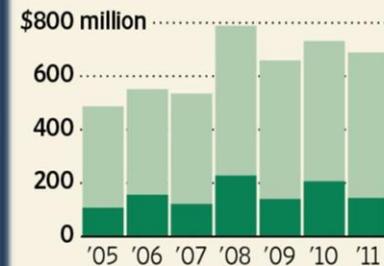


- The AFL–CIO's election programs place a heavy emphasis on **member-to-member contacts** such as workplace flyers, home visits and calls.
- While questions have been raised about the AFL–CIO's commitment to electoral politics as opposed to organizing, there is no question that organized labor as a whole can play a significant role in campaigns.
- In recent years, labor has seen a downward trend in membership and has lost some of its clout.
- One reason for the decline of unions is their mainly **negative portrayal in the mass media**.
- Strikes are the union action most often shown in the news. These are usually framed not as legitimate collective tactics to improve wages and working conditions, but as hurting or inconveniencing consumers.

## Weighing In

Unions' political spending far exceeds their reported federal campaign and lobbying spending.

■ Federal campaigns and lobbying  
■ Additional reported to Labor Dept.



Sources: WSJ analysis of union reports filed with the Labor Department; Center for Responsive Politics

The Wall Street Journal

# What Do Interest Groups Do?

## Direct Action



- direct action: involves everything from peaceful sit-ins and demonstrations to riots and even rebellion
- media campaigns
- attending public government meetings
- Some groups resort to more forceful, legal as well as illegal measures to attract attention to their cause.
  - sometimes violent, illegal protest (Boston Tea Party, Shay's Rebellion)
  - Civil Rights Movement
    - marches and rallies with legal permits



L-R: civil rights march on Washington, Boston tea party, Kent State



# Why Do Groups Engage in Some Activities and Not Others?

- Different groups use different strategies or mixes of strategies.
- depends on group characteristics
  - What kind of group it is, what kind of resources, and how much of the resource it has all determine strategic choices.



○ depends on situational characteristics

○ What is available to the group? Civil rights organizations did not have access to traditional tools like lobbying. They had to use the courts.

# What Makes An Interest Group Successful?



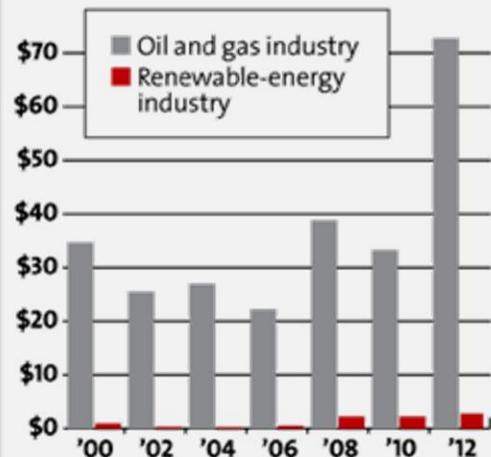
- prestige
- respected leadership
- patrons and funding: person who finances a group or individual activity by group
- members: status and distribution
  - If there are too many free riders, the group won't be successful.
- goals: ease or difficulty ... preventing legislation from being enacted is usually easier than passing it ... legislation enacted over the opposition of powerful groups tends to be watered down or the costs of its passage are so heavy that its proponents are discouraged from challenging it again
- political skills

# What Makes An Interest Group Successful?

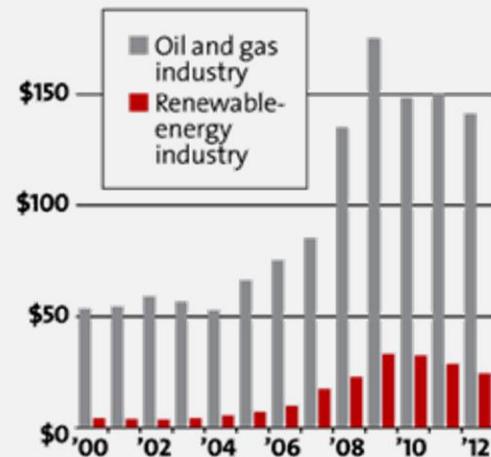


- size
- cohesiveness
- visibility: sometimes most successful when group's activities are unreported by the media, unscrutinized by policymakers and hidden from public ... Opposition to a group's activities is difficult when they're not visible.
- available and ample resources, particularly finances

**Political Giving** (in millions)



**Federal Lobbying** (in millions)



Note the difference in amounts given between the oil and gas industry and the renewable energy industry.

# What Makes An Interest Group Successful?

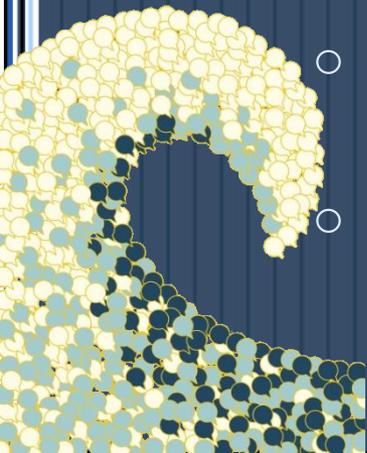


- **alliances**: sometimes cooperate with other groups to help achieve a policy objective they could not accomplish alone ... expands resources, broadens expertise and adds to the credibility of the policy objectives
- **media depiction**: disproportionate coverage of a few groups enhances their importance ... sparse or nonexistent coverage of groups means their demands, activities, policy perspectives don't reach policymakers or public ... unfavorable media depictions of unions reinforce their negative stereotypes ... coverage of business groups conveys their power
- **political change**: A new president or a change in party control of Congress usually benefits some groups while putting others at a disadvantage.



# How Influential are Interest Groups?

- **subgovernments**: alliance of a congressional committee, the executive agency and interest groups
- **issue networks**: a loose constellation of larger numbers of committees, agencies, interest groups and policy experts active in a particular policy area
- Consensus today is that issue networks are more representative of the policy environment than iron triangles.
- Even term “network” may exaggerate the organization in interest group activity.
- Likely that interest group influence is *conditional* and ranges from weak to strong depending on the conditions under which groups try to influence politics.



# Interest Groups and Democratic Politics



- James Madison

- one of the first pluralists
- *Federalist 10*: his description of factions defines the interest groups found today: people who share common goals, interact with each other and organize to affect the public agenda. ... predicted the potential for multiple factions on many topics



- Did not foresee several modern developments: tremendous expansion of society, great range of interests, **logrolling**: the practice of exchanging favors by reciprocal voting for each other's proposed legislation

# Interest Groups and Democratic Politics



- The theme of the evils of factions has recurred throughout American history.
- The American public traditionally has viewed interest groups as narrowly self-interested and held them in low regard. Why?
- Pluralism sees their positive contributions.
  - pluralism: school of thought holding that politics is the clash of groups that represent all important interests in society and that check and balance each other ... in the give and take of politics everyone has to expect victories and losses

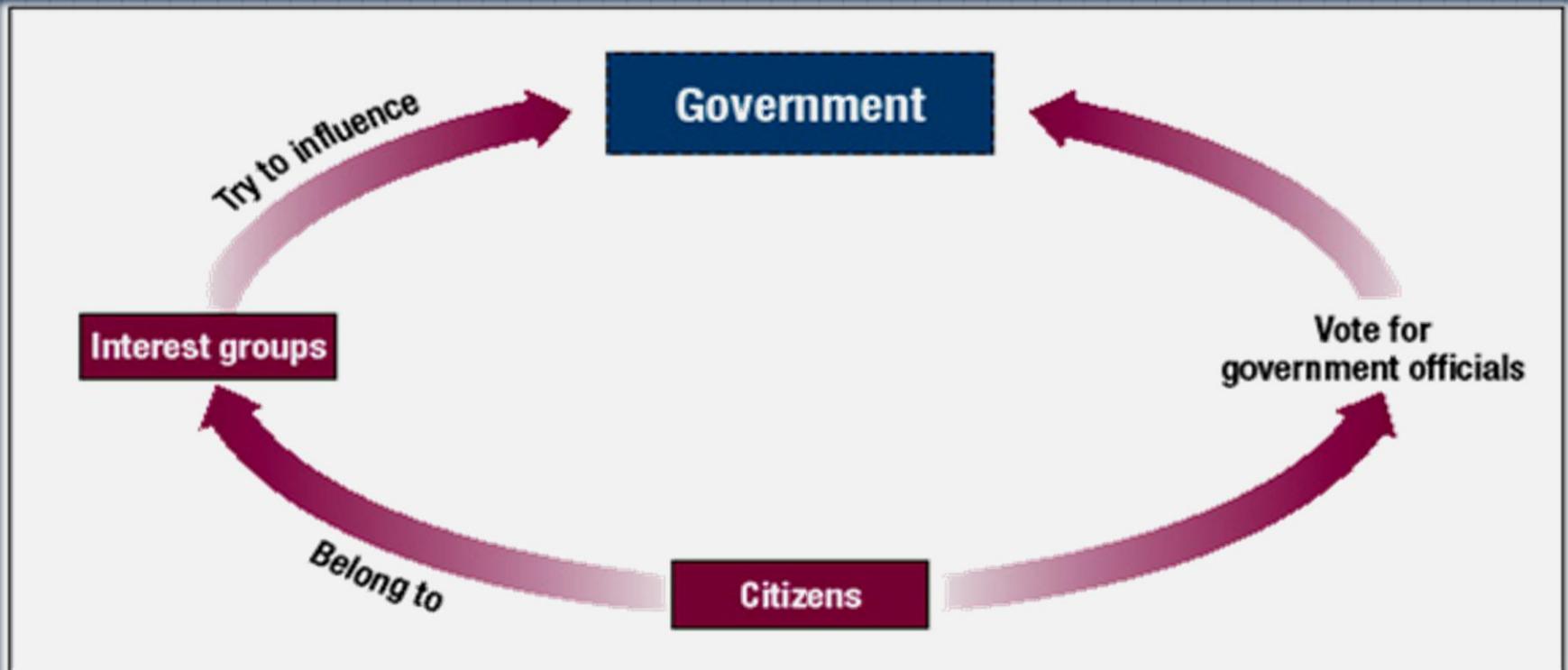


# Interest Groups and Democratic Politics



- Pluralists believe that American politics is best understood in terms of the interaction, conflict and bargaining of groups.
- Interest groups convey public desires to government officials better than do elections.
- People are free to join or to organize groups that reflect their own interests.
- Because power is dispersed in the American political system, there are many openings for diverse groups to have their interests heard.
- Due to the ease of group formation and the accessibility of government, all legitimate interest groups can have their views heard.

# Interest Groups and Democratic Politics



In the pluralist understanding of the way American democracy works, citizens have more than one way to influence government leaders. In addition to voting, citizens also have the opportunity to participate in organizations that convey member views to public officials. Because of weak political parties, federalism, checks and balances, and the separation of powers, access to public officials is relatively easy.

# Interest Groups and Democratic Politics



## Criticisms of Pluralism

- overstates opportunities to use political resources ... severe inequality in distribution of resources ... Politically valuable resources tend to be concentrated among rich and already powerful members of society. Those at the bottom have much less to work with.
- functions best when ordinary citizens govern least (sometimes called democratic elitism) ... leaves 90–95% of Americans on sidelines as spectators rather than participants
- neutrality of government is questioned ... assumed that state favors some groups over others
- inequality of access
- [The influence of elites, interest groups and average voters on American politics](#)

# Interest Groups and Democratic Politics



## Criticisms of Pluralism

- Interest of whole nation is not equal to the sum of the interests of the parts.
- Groups distort political discussions, reinforce extremism and undercut moderation. General interests of moderate population get lost amid bitter fighting of intense and extreme special interests.
  - Groups claim to represent the interests of their members or constituents, but these interests may conflict. For example, civil rights organizations prioritized the interests of their middle-class members over the interests of the poor and working class when they pushed for affirmative action rather than welfare and antipoverty policies.



# Interest Groups and Democratic Politics



- **positive aspect of interest groups:** advantage for democracy because it allows individual citizens to influence government in ways that are beyond their ballot – links them to the public agenda
- **negative aspect of interest groups:** poorer citizens and minorities are poorly represented ... too much money involved in the process ... too much opportunity for influence over the public agenda to be purchased

# Interest Groups and Democratic Politics

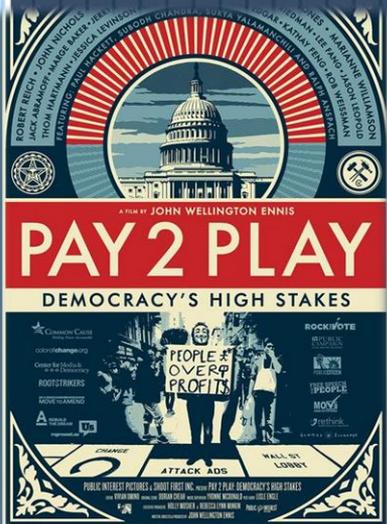


Money suffuses our political system. Candidates must spend huge sums to get elected, and once they do, well-funded interests spend huge sums to influence how they vote.

Campaign finance laws are being struck down by the courts, and money is rushing to outside groups that don't have to disclose their donors.

Some studies have found companies can get as much as a 22,000% return on their lobbying dollars, while a recent poll found that more than 90% of Americans wants to reduce the role of money in politics.

At this point, the implications for our democracy are unclear.





The End